



SIMON SPRINGER 'THE ANARCHIST ROOTS OF GEOGRAPHY'

Book review

Trespass Journal

Intervention for Issue 1

July 28th 2016

THE

ANARCHIST

ROOTS

OF

GEOGRAPHY

TOWARD SPATIAL
EMANCIPATION



Written by:

SIMON SPRINGER
Rowan Tallis Milligan

Art work made by Stefan Bakmand

Squatting as Spatial Emancipation

Book review: Simon Springer [The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Towards Spatial Emancipation](#) (Minnesota Press 2016)

Simon Springer's *The Anarchist Roots of Geography*, published earlier this year, functions both as a brief history of the main theoretical intersections between anarchism and geography, and also as a personal manifesto of Springer's conception of anarchism and framework for what he terms 'spatial emancipation'. In this review, I will focus on this concept of spatial emancipation and outline its significance for a practice of squatting.

Springer's idea of 'spatial emancipation' encapsulates the intellectual roots of anarchist thought and, in so doing, exemplifies anarchism's vital links with geography. That said, it is the practical and everyday implications of this theory of spatial emancipation on daily life that has most implications for squatting and that I want to tease out in more detail within this review.

First I will offer a brief overview of the text. Springer begins by introducing his key points: his disagreements with a Marxist framework of revolution and geography; a suggestion of his disapproval of violence within anarchism; and a reference to some of the main theorists he will be discussing. In chapter one he offers a brief history of the intersections between anarchism and geography, focusing on the works of Proudhon, Reclus and Kropotkin for his main theoretical points. He makes a convincing case during this chapter for the importance of including these key thinkers in any conception of a radical geographic trajectory, and demonstrates how they have been sidelined, wrongly, compared to Marxist theorists, who came to dominate any conception of radical geography. In the next chapter, he continues along this line of argument, focusing specifically on the twin trajectories of Marxist and anarchist theory within the discipline, and demonstrating the prioritisation of a Marxist analysis within academia. He then turns towards the key values of anarchism, discrediting the media-fuelled misconception of anarchism as only violent chaos, focussing instead on mutual aid, prefigurative living, and the struggle towards equality and harmony between all living beings.

During this chapter he still gives great prominence to the discussion of anarchism's values in comparison with Marxism, although he recognises that there has been an anarchist turn in more recent years, assisted by radical journals such as ACME and Antipode. He also offers a touching personal explanation of his own reasons for identifying as an anarchist and the important link between his scholarship and his own beliefs, which is very refreshing in an academic text. Chapter four, 'Emancipatory Space', is most relevant to squatters, in its treatment of the public/private space dichotomy, and the concept of spatial emancipation. He explores both the importance of public space to anarchist practice and also offers an interpretation of Radical Democratic theory as a framework for conceiving of a politics that embraces his anarchist sensibilities and beliefs. During this chapter he also extensively

grounds his beliefs in non-violence, using the Radical Democratic concept of agonism to explain his ideal public sphere.

He continues the discussion on non-violence in the subsequent chapter, which also offers an anarchist understanding of the role of [organised] religion in repressive regimes. Finally, he concludes with an overview of his core anarchist values. Therein, he argues for a concept of 'flattening' the world in order to explain how theories of scale can both obfuscate the significance of engaging in anarchist practices in our everyday life and shut down anarchist arguments for a politics of prefiguration. His final note is a rally to prefigurative living as in order for "the promise of spatial emancipation to be fulfilled as the realisation of an anarchist geography, we must become beautiful ourselves, we must become the horizon ... if one courageous act can make the Colossus tremble, then together, united as a vista of hope, we might just bring the giant to its knees" (p.117).

The main argument discussed in this review is Springer's emphasis on space and on prefiguration, which has important implications for any discussion and practice of squatting. At the beginning of his chapter, 'Emancipatory Space', he outlines his beliefs in an agonistic public space as a basis for emancipation. Springer derives his concept of agonism from Radical Democratic Theory, and primarily through the works of Chantal Mouffe. Emerging out of the work of theorists such as Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière, Radical Democratic Theory enables a politics of contestation. (Alan Finlayson, 'Rhetoric and Radical Democratic Political Theory' in Adam Little and Moya Lloyd, eds. *The politics of radical democracy*, (Edinburgh, 2009), p.13)

Within this framework, the concept of agonism refers to the practice of mutually respectful contestation between adversaries in contrast to antagonistic forms of engagement aiming at the destruction of one's enemy. (Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London, 2000), p.102)

This has important implications for social movements, suggesting that movements which strive towards social and political change need to have an alternative framework of democracy which challenges that of neoliberalism, which centres consensus and thus obfuscates dissent (Eric Swyngedouw, 'The Post-Political City', in *Urban Politics Now: Re-imagining democracy in the neoliberal city*. Vol. 6., Nicholas Lakides, (NAI Publishers, 2007)).

For Springer, Radical Democracy envisions public space as 'the battlefield on which the conflicting interests of the rich and poor are set as well as the object of contestation' (p.98). Squatters understand only too well the battles over space which are wrought, whether in attempts to create a public social centre or a more private domain of living, and in struggles over definitions of ownership of space. Paramount to much squatting ideology and practice is the assertion that a space does not belong to a single individual but rather to a collective, with their own self-defined limits (Barocchio Occupato [Against the Legalisation of Occupied Spaces](#), 1995).

Thus, Springer's argument for a reconceptualization of public space has important theoretical implications for squatters, who openly challenge the public-private dichotomy and could benefit from a strong theory of public space with which to reinforce their struggles

Springer uses Radical Democratic theory to call for a more agonistic public space, arguing that attempts to impose order onto a public space from above initiate violent conflict with those resisting this imposition “from below”.

Here, I want to tease out both his arguments in favour of an agonistic public space (in opposition to one of open antagonism) and his conceptions of public space as socially produced. Agonistic politics attempt to convert the ‘enemy’ who must ‘be destroyed’ into the ‘adversary’, whose position is to be respected if a solution is to occur. In other words, politics aims at domesticating violent divisions, whereby groups can contest each other without destroying one another. In the context of squatting, there is clearly an us/them division, and one that is explicitly between squatter, and the state, corporations, and neoliberal society in general (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p.102; Rowan Tallis Milligan, ‘The Politics of the Crowbar: Squatting in London, 1968-1977’, *Anarchist Studies*, (Forthcoming, 2017)).

Whilst Springer recognises that conflict is a necessary part of any kind of democratic living, as any politics that aims to disavow conflict borders on authoritarianism, Radical Democratic theory seems unable to provide Springer with the theoretical grounding for such a conflictual politics. An agonistic conception of politics relies on a rough equality between adversaries contesting space. (Andrew Schaap (ed.), *Law and Agonistic Politics*, (London, 2016), p.9)

“We ought to stay angry!”

However, such adversarial equality is lacking in the context of squatting. In no instance are squatters on a level playing field with property developers, owners, security forces, or the team of lawyers, policemen and institutional powers which they rally to defend themselves. To argue against a narrative of violence in favour for ‘harmonious’ contestation would, in this case, propagate the status quo, as the institutional imbalance between squatters and the state is not surmountable through debate within a democratic sphere, as Mouffe’s model suggests, even with a platform for peaceful protest and civil disobedience. Mouffe’s conception of agonism tends more towards a pacification of the very real conflicts in which squatters find themselves (Rowan Tallis Milligan, ‘The Politics of the Crowbar: Squatting in London 1968-1977’, *Anarchist Studies*, (2017)).

I would find it very difficult persuading anyone who has ever had their head kicked in by a security guard, been thrown against a wall by a policeman, or even gone through the ritual humiliation of defending oneself in court against a wealthy institutional framework that an agonistic solution is possible, at least in the short term.

Indeed, squatting exemplifies an antagonistic relation of violence that the conceptual framework of agonism fails to capture. Arguing against violence in this manner takes away some of the very few tools we have in our arsenal

against the established orders and leaves us even more susceptible to manipulation and pacification. We ought to stay angry!

Yet, Springer's position regarding this kind of 'violent' resistance is unclear. He acknowledges his pacifist views and argues against violence, dismissing some of the insurrectionist trajectories within anarchism, such as Propaganda of the Deed. However, he also differentiates between violence and counterviolence, suggesting that fighting back against an oppressor does not constitute violence in itself (p.120).

Thus, he fails to draw out the conceptual parallels between the 'everyday insurrection' necessary and important to squatting, and his own conceptions of prefiguration. A strong tension thus exists between Springer's advocacy of the 'insurrection of everyday life' and his hesitation to associate his brand of anarchism with openly insurrectionist elements within anarchist history (Sasha K, [Some Notes on Insurrectionary Anarchism](#)). I feel this complexity could have been further developed, as our right to defend ourselves with anger and aggression is necessary and important to promote, if we are to attempt to overcome repression in our daily lives.

While he demonstrates the importance of public space and recognises the social production of such space, Springer does not go far enough in asserting the need for the publicisation of space. Again, such activity of making-public is fundamental to the practice of squatting; to take a space formerly accessible to only a privileged few and opening it up to a broader range of participants is itself an empowering politic act. Springer recognizes this possibility when he states that 'public space can be understood as the very practice of Radical Democracy' (p.107). It is through the construction of shared spaces that we attempt to have our ideals put into action as individuals and collectives as it is 'in the making and *taking* of space and place that allows us to move towards a more radical democracy' [my emphasis] (p.106). This very definite action of taking space, of asserting oneself and one's collective ideas, is an essential element of anarchism, prefiguration, and just one of the many reasons why squatting is a key element of serious anarchist praxis. We must be actively fighting to de-privatise spaces; we must be openly critiquing private institutions, even those we benefit from; we must recognise that private spaces are paramount to borders, walls, and exclusion. Any true Radical Democracy must attempt to dismantle the category of exclusion as far as possible, and as such, an agonistic framework does not give adequate space for the violence sometimes necessary in claiming a space as (y)ours and the broader public-*ising* of space.

This ties into Springer's important critique of the liberal rhetoric of publicness which inscribes certain forms of subordination and exclusion, as access to the public is conceived only insofar as one leaves their own particular subjectivities (e.g. sexual, racial, gendered, etc. identity) behind in the private sphere. Thus, he advocates for a material and embodied conception of public space that 'rests in its potential to be a site of political participation where diverse publics can interact'(p.113). As he recognises, public space is only a site of democracy when crowds took matters into their own hands. Again, chafing against his analysis of anarchism as essentially nonviolent, he suggests that 'to demand inclusion in a

space often means forcibly occupying the space of exclusion, reinforcing the idea that public space has never been guaranteed and, by its very definition, must be contested' (p.113).

This is an important justification of squatting, as squatters are on the front line of the battle over claiming space every day and exist in an ongoing conflict that does not cease once you have managed to secure your building. To take a space in which you are able to be your own bodies is an affront to capital and private conceptions of space and as such is never simply allowed but continually challenged. The use of force is not only desirable (especially to those tired of being told to "stay calm" and "maintain respect" to those who are taking away their home) but also often necessary. As he himself recognises, crime is most often conceived in terms of property rights and accordingly, the poor and propertyless are repeatedly cast as transgressors of public space", something which he recognises needs to be challenged.¹⁶

This book is an important intervention into current theoretical discussions around the importance of anarchism within academia and life, and in challenging dominant conceptions of public and private space. Thus, it is worthwhile for squatters to discuss his ideas and suggestions, as both of these elements - contestation of space and prefigurative living - are key to squatting practice, and concepts which I hold dearly. It is a valuable text that hopefully will expand the discussion of anarchism's worth within academia and everyday life beyond the marginal milieus in which it currently resides. As squatters we are on the front lines of the battle over space and as anarchists we know what it means to live based on mutual aid and collective efforts. On this note I will close this review with a quotation from Springer:

Without embracing our capacity for living now and doing for ourselves in this moment what we would otherwise leave to the protocols of authority, we kneel exposed at the foot of the giant with his cruel and ugly shadow drawn upon our backs. Those of us who embrace anarchism don't simply yearn for the light. We stand and walk towards it, claiming that strength is to be found not in what is dreamed possible but as an illumination of the powerful beauty we collectively represent. So let us reject the darkness that threatens to devour us all. Let us convene a new language of aesthetics that places each and every one of us at the centre of its conversation. Let us become beautiful by recognising the meaning of each other's lives in concert with our own. But most of all, let us awaken to the fact that beautiful is something we already are. This sentiment forms the heart of an anarchist geography. It is our path to spatial emancipation.

Rowan Tallis Milligan

TEGN

